Volume 43 | Number 1 Article 2

7-2016

FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE: The Story of Paducah's 1937 "Super-Flood" From The Personal Accounts of Those Who Survived

FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE: The Story of Paducah's 1937 "Super-Flood" From The Personal Accounts of Those Who Survived.

By Richard B. Davis

> The comeback Paducah is staging after its major catastrophe is nothing short of a headline feat. Its rebound from pit to peek merits all the hosannas which sister communities are singing, all the laudatory adjectives evoked by its astounding resiliency. A month ago the community was suffering all the torments and hopeless dejection of a man on whose door the sheriff tacks a sign. It looked like ghastly ruin. Yet in the space of only two weeks the city has bounced back marvelously and business has gained remarkable momentum; not normal after such a heavy blow, but well on the way. The old town is marching ahead full tilt, to a bigger, better and happier community than ever before.[1]
>
> Fred G. Neuman
> March 1, 1937

Many accounts of various degrees have been recorded in written and verbal form concerning the events surrounding what has become known as Paducah's "Super-Flood" that occurred during January and February of 1937. During those months the mighty Ohio River spilled out of its banks and inundated cities and towns from Pittsburg,

Pennsylvania, to Cairo, Illinois, and beyond. For Paducah, Kentucky, this would be the worst natural disaster since its incorporation in 1830, a record which would stand until an ice storm would devastate the area during the same month 72 years later in 2009. With the exception of author Irvin S. Cobb and former Vice-President of the United States Alben W. Barkely, the flood in 1937 is what Paducah, Kentucky is known for. Today, just as our veterans of World War II are passing into history, so are the survivors of the flood and along with them their personal experiences. Information concerning such details as the high-water levels, the total area deluged, the associated cost involved, the governmental response, damage to the hundreds of buildings and homes that were flooded, and the associated casualties are all well documented. However, personal accounts of the flood victims are not so well known. What was the flood like for the average citizen that had to leave their homes to avoid the rising waters of the Ohio River that cold January in 1937? Where did they live? How did they get out? When they evacuated, where did they go and how did they get there? These are a few of the questions that are virtually unknown to the average citizen that now resides in Paducah whose age is less than 80 years old. In 1987, that would all change with the 50th Anniversary of that devastating event when the flood survivors began recording their experiences.

Residents in river communities have always lived with the risks involved with living near or on major rivers. Even today, flooding continues to be a

problem for towns located on the major rivers of the United States such as the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, not to mention along secondary rivers in every state. The residents of Paducah, Kentucky were no different and knew from the beginning that flooding could be a serious problem, especially since the confluence of the Tennessee River and the Ohio River occurred at Paducah. However, loss of life was rare and outside aid not a necessity. The flood state for the Ohio River at Paducah, Kentucky, in 1937 was 39.0 feet[2] (just as it is today) and until 1937 had only measured above 50.0 feet four times (1831, 1867, 1884, and 1913).[3] In April of 1913, part of Paducah was inundated as the Ohio River rose and finally crested at 54.2 feet and remained at above 50.0 feet for several days. Even at this height, the damage was minimal and no outside assistance was requested. The city and county (McCracken) appropriated $6,000.00 for the purpose of providing relief for those who required it and a refugee camp was set up at Colonial Heights.[4] As the water retreated back into its banks, the citizens of Paducah also retreated into a deadly sense of denial in thinking that the water probably would not return to the level of 1913 in their lifetimes. Twenty-four years later, the rains would return with a vengeance and strike the area with a natural disaster that would not be surpassed for 72 years.

Since the 1913 flood, the United States of America and the City of Paducah, Kentucky, went through some terrible and wonderful times. Not long after the 1913 flood, a terrible war of the likes the world had never seen broke out in Europe between

German, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire (known as The Central Powers) and France, Great Britain, and Russia (known as the Triple Entente). In 1917 the United States reluctantly entered the war on the side of the Triple Entente and began sending troops to France. Beginning with the first draft contingent on September 19, 1917, Paducah would send more than 1250 men off to the war with 250 of the recruits being African-American.[5] Robert C. McCune was the first battlefield casualty to be sent back to Paducah for burial. The Great War ended with the signing of the armistice on November 11, 1918, and with it Paducah's surviving veterans returned home. The 1920's brought prosperity to the United States and Paducah. McCracken County established two more high schools, Lone Oak and Reidland, to go with the first county high school which was renamed Heath. Previously established Paducah High School was renamed Augusta Tilghman High School and made a total of four high schools for the area. Sports were becoming more prominent and the Heath High School would be the first school west of Louisville to win the Kentucky High School Athletic Association Boys State Basketball Championship in 1929. A new bridge was built to span the Ohio River between Paducah, Kentucky, and Brookport, Illinois. The good times were not to last though as in October of 1929 the New York Stock Exchange crashed sending the United States and the world into an economic downturn that would later be named "The Great Depression." The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 resulted in the establishment of

various new federal agencies that would later play major roles in the evacuation of flood victims and also provide services in the aftermath. In late 1936, the country was slowly recovering from the depression and with the various federal work projects being implemented, signs of prosperity began to show and Paducah went into the holiday season with high hopes for the coming New Year. Then just after Christmas 1936, it began to rain.

Through their research, flood scholars have formulated various opinions on exactly when the 1937 flood started and what meteorological conditions caused it. In their personal accounts, survivors of the flood also formed opinions of the flood's timing and cause, but they were more concerned with survival than what role barometric pressure had on rainfall. Rain began falling all across the Ohio River watershed portion of the United States off and on beginning in very late December 1936 and began falling steadily over the same areas beginning in early January of 1937.[6] The Ohio River had experienced relatively low water level stages during the previous months and the moderate to heavy rainfall in late December caused the river to begin to slowly rise. To make matters even worse the temperature began to drop and a severe sleet storm struck Paducah on January 9th. In his diary he kept during the flood, Paducah resident Carroll Graves, Sr., noted on January 9, 1937, "Well this is some night. We have one of the worse sleet storms that Paducah has had for 36 years. All the tree limbs are breaking and trees are coming down. All the lights are out and will be for several

days. Oh, it is some night, you can't sleep at all. You would think that somebody is shouting at you the way limbs are popping."[7] On January 10, 1937, Mr. Graves also noted "Well about all the trees are a wreak. I guess about all of my squirrels are gone, they will all have to hunt new homes."[8] Another relatively unnoticed milestone also occurred on January 10th, but went unrecorded in Carroll Graves's diary. Since early January, the Ohio River had been creeping upward and reached its official government established flood stage of 39.0 feet[9] and then continued its rise unnoticed while people dealt with the more immediate issue of damage from the ice storm.

As the Ohio makes its way south by west, the Tennessee River merges with it at Paducah and then makes its way to Cairo, Illinois, where it confluences with the Mississippi River a short distance away near Wickliffe, Kentucky. As the rain fell in torrents in the eastern and southeastern portions of the United States, it took several days for the water to reach Paducah. The residents of Paducah had been hearing for several days that the Ohio River was rising. The news was being passed by newspapers, mail, and by telephone for the larger river cities of Cincinnati, Louisville, and Evansville as the Ohio River reached flood stage at those respective areas on its way west. As city residents dealt with the ice storm event of January 9th, the looming potential for record flooding was being ignored. Those that had lived through the 1913 record flooding were not spooked by the flood warnings and were more concerned with restoring their utilities such as

electricity, telephone, and mail service. They could see that the water level was rising, but did not think that the water would reach the levels of 1913. Besides, residents were used to the fact that most flooding that happened in the Paducah area happened during the spring, just as the 1913 flood had happened in April, and flooding during the early winter months was a rare event. However, people began noticing that it was raining a little more than usual and the river was reportedly rising in the northeastern portions of the state. As a matter of fact, it had been raining pretty much off and on every day since late December. People began going to the riverfront at the foot of Broadway and looking at the passing water and noticed that it was nearing the top of the boat ramps. Still most people just could not believe that the river would get higher than it did in 1913. The January 14, 1937 edition of the *Paducah Sun-Democrat* reported that the weather bureau's forecast was for heavy rain and says "no danger of flood". Sam Livingston, writing for *the Paducah Sun-Democrat* in 1937, noted in an undated 1937 post-flood article that "Even when it (river) rose from 44.7 feet on January 18 to 46.2 feet on January 20 did they (citizens) pay much attention to the rise." Associated Press reporter Edwin B. Greenwald made the following observation:

> Paducah remembered 1913. The reaches of that historic flood were revived. Some reasoned: Since it went just so far back in '13, we'll be safe this time. So, resting behind such

assurances, the city was more or less unprepared for that which was to follow. It awakened one bitterly cold morning to the stunning realization it was marooned, and that four inches of ice atop the relentlessly climbing waters would make rescue difficult in the extreme.[10]

On January 20th, the Ohio was recorded officially at a stage of 47.5 feet when a deluge of 1.5 inches of rainfall came overnight and into the early morning hours of January 21st that pushed the river stage 2.5 feet to 50.0 feet. Greenwald continued his report:

> The river was rolling high Thursday night, Jan. 21, churning sullenly toward the Mississippi at a level better than 51 feet. It had already broken over the foot of Broadway, Lower Kentucky, Jefferson, and Washington was under. And of course, the lower points of the city were lost from sight. The first of the flood refugees had been brought in from the lowland and sheltered in the old Southern Hotel at First and Broadway. And still came the assurance: "No more than back in '13."[11]

The single day rainfall total on January 21st was 3.34 inches and on January 22nd Paducah measured a whopping 3.72 inches of rain for a 24 hour period. The rainfall for either one of these two days was more than Paducah averaged for the entire month

of January. However, there would be more rain. Much more.

In Washington, D.C., it appeared that even the President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, could not escape the torrents of rain as he delivered his second inauguration address in the middle of a heavy downpour. However, the President, and his wife Eleanor, rode to his inaugural parade reviewing area in an open car in the rain.[12] While Washington seemed to be paying little attention and Paducah's residents just now starting to be concerned about the rising water, another group was paying attention to what was happening to the mighty Ohio at Paducah. That group was the McCracken County Chapter of the American Red Cross. They too remembered 1913 and even though their part in that flood was minimal, they felt that this flood was going to be different. In anticipation of refugees needing shelter, food, and clothing, the American Red Cross began to set up its operation in the Boy Scout headquarters at Sixth and Broadway in Paducah on January 19 and a larger central disaster relief headquarters was set up at Evansville, Indiana. A Disaster Council was created along with sub-committees for Transportation, Finance, Shelter, Food, Nursing, Survey, Registration, and Clothing. McCracken County Judge Brady M. Stewart was selected to be the overall Chairman of the Disaster Committee. For Paducah, this was just in time as the deluge of rain hit like a sledgehammer on January 20th and 21st. In his article, Edwin B. Greenwald reported:

> At 10 O'clock that night (January 21, 1937), Schultz Riggs, chairman of the McCracken County Chapter of the American Red Cross, walked slowly into the editorial rooms of the *Paducah Sun-Democrat*. His face was serious as he pulled a telegram from his pocket and pushed it across the desk of the editor. It said: "Prepare for the worst flood in history on the lower valley." The warning was under the signature of the American Red Cross.[13]

Just when things could not seem to get any worse, an unforeseen event took place with the sudden rise of the river. After receiving the telegram from Riggs, the leadership of the *Paducah Sun-Democrat* met and had to make two major decisions: First was establish the best way to get the word out about the impending disaster, and second was to address the issue of how they were going to print the newspaper when they themselves would have to leave within the next several hours. On the first question, the paper made a decision to print one last edition before the printing plant would cease to be able to print due to the rapidly rising water. On the second issue, the paper would try and find a way to resume printing so as to assist the public in the next critical days. Since the newspaper was the way the most people of Paducah got their news, the newspapers leadership had to know that it was critical that they resume printing as soon as possible. One way the newspaper would keep the people informed was over radio. The *Paducah Sun-Democrat* editorial staff began broadcasting over

WPAD radio at various intervals as long as the power would hold out. Today we enjoy up to the minute news on just about every subject that one could imagine. On the television there are several 24 hour news channels that are able to report events in real time as they happen as was the case with 9/11 in 2001. The Internet also has revolutionized the way people worldwide get the news. In 1937, there was no television or Internet. Telephones were a luxury and the United States Mail Service was the only way to communicate with the exception of the newspapers of the time. The final edition of the *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, until its return to Paducah four weeks later after the flood waters receded, was printed on January 23, 1937, and contained this final flood bulletin and warning:

> Reaching a stage of 55 feet at noon today (January 23), the rise of the river here began to slow, one feet of rise expected in 24 hrs., with 57 to 58-ft. crest likely next week. Ohio falling at Pittsburg, on stand at Cincy (Cincinnati, OH) today. About 1500 families moved from homes here. Believe all flooded homes evacuated. No lives lost. Power cut off at noon, may resume at 4 today. Fred Duncan, Paris, reported electrocuted while working on power lines here. West end isolated. Food, fuel, for 1 week or 10 days. May get additional supplies. Telephone service practically suspended. Long distance intermittent. Cold weather favorable to slower rise.[14]

This evening edition was distributed at all of the normal venues that were still accessible and as the people picked up this edition, the reality of the looming crisis began to sink in. Now residents began to take the rising water seriously. The night of January 23, 1937, was flurry of activity in the city. The January 23, 1937, diary entry of Carroll Graves, Sr. records "Well this is the first day for us to see water around the house. The water is about two feet deep in the street this morning. Major and I are going over to Nick's and get him out. Well we got Nichol's over at our house. We are marooned and can not get out so we don't know what is going on outside."[15]

With the exception of the diary kept by Carroll Graves Sr., during the flood that begins with his entry on January 9th, and the accounts in the *Paducah Sun-Democrat* until its departure from the city, most flood survivor accounts begin during the time period spanning from January 18th to Januar4y 24th. Very, very few mention anything about the period leading up to mid-January and it was not until the aftermath articles in the newspaper by Edwin B. Greenwald and others, that information about what ordinary citizens were experiencing was made known. It appears that the damage by the ice storm on January 9th and 10th was foremost on resident's minds until the night of January 23rd. As the water moved upward, there were some displaced people that were being tended to by the Red Cross and were sheltered in the old Southern Hotel, but there was not a major exodus of people from the city until

January 24, 1937, a date that has been given the title "Black Sunday"[16] in government meteorological and engineering annals due to the fact that for the first time the Ohio River was above its established flood states its entire length from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, to Cairo, Illinois. Now a small panic began to take hold of Paducah as the river height rose above the previous record set in 1913 of 54.30 feet to a new record height of 56.10 feet.[17] Major relief efforts began to kick into high-hear as the federal and state governmental agencies began to take notice of the impending disaster that was forming along the east and southeast portion of the United States. One piece of good news that went unnoticed was that after January 24th, the rains tapered off in the region. In his article about the flood in the February 1937 *Monthly Weather Review,* Bennett Swenson wrote that:

> Practically all of the precipitation that occurred over the Ohio Valley occurred during the 1st-24th, inclusive during the first half of this period, 1st to the 12th, the rainfall was not abnormally heavy, nor was it concentrated over a small area. However, during the second-half, 13th-24th, inclusive, the rainfall was exceedingly heavy and the area of greatest intensity was located along the Ohio River from Cincinnati, Ohio, to the mouth (Cairo, Illinois) extending into Arkansas.[18]

With this rainfall, intermittent snow fell and temperatures hovered well below freezing. Ice was

now mixing with the flood waters and where water had made inroads into the city and was standing relatively still, ice was forming.

As the water continued to rise, the newly established Red Cross headquarters at Sixth and Broadway sent out a call for any and all boats and for people who knew how to operate them. They knew that the fast rise in the water would leave some people unable to leave their homes and they would have to be brought in and out by boat. In the lower section of Paducah where the water had begun to invade the merchant district, business owners began to move their wares and supplies to the higher portions of their stores and even upstairs if there were more floors to the buildings they occupied. The famous Market House closed its operations. Kirchoff's Bakery continued to operate until the rising water put out the ovens. George B. Adams was trapped in Kirchoff's Bakery at the time and recalls that "I was trapped in Kirchoff's Bakery that fateful weekend with my brother-in-law Rusty Shaffer, as he worked I watched the water rise high enough to see Red Cross boats come paddling in the front door to load bread. All production had stopped except making all the Big Boy Bread possible and that went on till the water got so deep that the oven burner was put out, then we scrambled!"[19] Many of the homes in the lower town portion of Paducah were of the two-story type and most had basements. As the basements began to fill with water, people simply moved their items upstairs and then to the second floor if one was available. The more cautious residents had already

left town for higher ground when they observed the water beginning to enter the streets. They simply packed what belongings they had room for in their vehicle or wagon, loaded the children and relatives and went to relatives outside of town or to shelters that were beginning to set up on higher ground west of town. The more adventurous and risk taking residents stayed on even after the water had surrounded their homes and forced themselves to move into the upper floors. In the later days of the flood during the evacuation, these residents would have to be reached by boat in order to leave. There were a few people who stayed in their homes the entire time in defiance of the later mandatory evacuation order, but they were few and far between.

People today wonder aloud as to why anyone would want to stay in their home while a flood is going on. Flood survivor accounts mention that some people were afraid of their homes being burglarized by the criminal element. History has proved that two things that always follow disasters are disease and crime. During Hurricane Katrina in 2005, local gangs and criminals did not abide by the evacuation order and stayed on after the majority of the citizens had been evacuated. Stores were burglarized and vandals did millions of dollars in damage. Network and cable television news channels broadcast the open looting of stores in the New Orleans areas. With food still visible on the shelves, the first items stolen were drugs, guns, and electronics. Sporadic gunfire could be heard while reporters took cover trying to report the event.

Though a much smaller city, Paducah had a criminal side and this element took advantage of the situation since most residents were only allowed to take one piece of luggage with them if they were evacuated by boat due to space limitations. Even pets were left behind and as the event progressed, people would try to feed the stranded animals as best they could by throwing meat and other food to them. One of the most famous stories to come out of the flood and got national attention in the flood aftermath was a story of what was thought to be a "stranded" cow on a second floor balcony of a house.

Reporters covering the flood found out that the story was indeed true and took pictures of the animal standing on the second floor balcony of the home located at 527 North Sixth Street near the lower town portion of Paducah. A famous picture appeared in National Geographic as well as other magazines around the nation, but no one seemed to know exactly how she got there or if she survived the flood. Years later, a man by the name of James "Jim" Huston who lived at the house, claimed to have been the one who had put "Bossie" on the balcony. In his later years, Jim's daughter, Jimmelyn, asked her father to tell her about the famous "Cow on the Balcony" so that she could write it down for posterity, (see appendix for complete story) which he did. That account was included in a later book about Paducah titled *My Paducah: From the Early Years to the Present.* In short, Jim Huston was living at 527 North Sixth Street with his mother and his aunt. His uncle asked him to come to his house and get a

cow named "Bossie" and bring her back with him to his house. Jim did as his uncle asked and retrieved the cow, along with some chickens that wanted to tag along, and brought them to his house. When the water got too high for her to be outside, Jim put the cow on the second floor balcony and there she stayed until the uncle came to get her after the flood water had receded. While she was there, the cow provided fresh milk for the family and the chickens provided fresh eggs.[20] Other citizens and their families were not so lucky. Dry goods such as flour, sugar, and corn meal that were not moved to higher storage areas quickly succumbed to the rain and flood water. Residents also began to run out of food at their homes. Food became scarce even though the Red Cross had emergency food coming.

Paducah Mayor Edgar Washburn tried to keep up a persona that even with the flooding, the city was continuing business as usual and as would be expected by its citizens. The *Paducah Sun-Democrat* reported on January 21st, under the byline of "Mayor Gets Feet Wet Inspecting City Jail", that he (Washburn) went to inspect the city jail that was located in the basement of city hall. While he was going to the basement via the elevator, it slipped and did not stop at the basement level and plummeted into the water that was invading the lower area and spilled into the elevator car. The paper also noted in the article that Washburn "went home to change his trousers, which were wet to the knees."[21] The city along with the county and state Road departments were offering assistance in any

way that they could in the form of equipment and personnel.

On January 24th at 7:15 p.m. the Paducah Water Works ceased operations and would not be able to provide sanitary fresh water until mid-February. Established in 1884, Paducah Water Works had been in continuous operation until the night of January 24th. It operated all through the 1913 flood and continued to provide water in 1937 until the plant's location was overcome by the river when the water level got to 57.0 feet. However, the plant did not shut down without a fight. An article that appeared in the *Paducah Sun-Democrat* in the aftermath reported that "Night and day prior to the closing, water company employees labored without sleep or food to maintain a pure running water supply for a distressed city."[22] The newspaper would also find a new home at the *Mayfield Messenger* who graciously allowed the paper to publish and print from its office in Mayfield. Those papers that were published in Mayfield during that time had an italicized heading under the publications title that states "published through the courtesy of *Mayfield Messenger*." The *Paducah Sun-Democrat* would continue to publish at the *Mayfield Messenger* for approximately four weeks until the water was low enough to move back into their facilities at Paducah. In its January 30, 1937 edition, the *Paducah Sun-Democrat* printed a "thank you" note to the outside community for all of the assistance that had been given to the city.[23] The paper would also print family location requests for free during the

entire flood event so that family members could let other family members know where they were.

Paducah Water Works would not be the only utility that would eventually fall victim to the rising water. Some areas of the city had not yet had its electric and telephone service restored from being knocked out of service by the ice storm two weeks prior. Electricity was easier to maintain due to it originating from outside the flood area. Kentucky Utilities personnel were able to disconnect flooded areas and re-route dry areas until finally, the electricity had to be shut off due to the danger it posed with so much water. Gas and telephone services were lost early on and would stay off for the duration. With all of this going on, those people who had missed out on leaving utilizing their own conveyances began the process of getting ready for the water to rise still higher. On January 26th the Ohio River rose to 58.80 feet and showed no signs of letting up. In his personal account, *Boats on Broadway*, Nathaniel B. Kell remembered:

> People in two-story homes began to move their furniture and housekeeping necessities to the second floor. Those in single-floor homes began stacking their furniture on boxes or any elevations they could devise, to keep it above the hoped for limited rise of the water. Those with upper floors took up housekeeping on the second floor. Even these people were without heat if they depended upon basement furnaces. However, most homes had fireplaces or flues into which stovepipes

from wood or coal-burning heating stoves could be connected. These were generally present even in those homes that had long been heated by central furnaces – a holdover from earlier days. People in single-story homes began to move to the homes of friends, relatives, or neighbors who lived either in two-story homes or in an area of town that was higher. Some found it necessary to move several times and, in the end, to be evacuated from the area.[24]

Disease is always a large killer in the aftermath of disasters. This fact was not lost on the disaster committee that had been set up as it worked closely with the McCracken County Board of Health. Arrangements for inoculations would have to be made and request for the vaccines sent in to have an adequate supply. The most serious culprit would be Typhoid and thousands of doses would be needed. Fresh water and food was also beginning to run short and water was brought in to those people still in their homes in water cans and rain barrels. It was still bitterly cold and local officials knew that if the water did not crest soon that a general evacuation order would have to be given and those who had not left yet would have to be moved somewhere to a shelter. Members of the Kentucky Army National Guard were mobilized on January 21, 1937 for flood duty with 175 soldiers representing eight different units being stationed in the flood area since around January 26th in anticipation of an evacuation and to provide

assistance to Paducah in any capacity they could. The order came as Governor A. B. "Happy" Chandler was in Washington, D.C. attending the second inauguration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the request for federal action was sent to Washington D.C. by Lieutenant Governor Keene Johnson. The soldiers were supplemented by 205 members of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) who were brought in from various places that were in close proximity to the flood zone. It was being anticipated that there would be a number of people who would refuse to leave and units of the regular army were being ordered to the area, not to enforce martial law, but to assist the local county and city governments.

As people continued to move slowly out of the flooded areas, rumors began circulating among the people still in their homes that they were going to be forced to leave. Finally, the expected order for mandatory evacuation of the flood area was issued on January 29, 1937, by the State Board of Health of Kentucky and was being placed in the newspapers, at the refugee centers, on trees, lamp posts, flag poles, and generally anything that was higher than the water so that it could be seen and read. It was also to be read verbatim to any individual that refused to leave and remove them by force if necessary. Along with hand bills and word of mouth, the order that was issued that day was also published in the *Paducah Sun-Democrat*. It read:

Whereas, under the date of January 29, 1937, the State Board of Health of Kentucky issued the following order:

County Board of Health, Paducah, Ky.:
Acting under the authority conferred upon it by the law, the State Health Board of Kentucky instructs you to evacuate Paducah and removal of its citizens from the area immediately. You are authorized to issue orders to this effect to the County Judge or Sheriff of McCracken county and to the Mayor, the City Manager, and Chief of Police of Paducah and to all peace officers and they are authorized to arrest and remove from this area any person or persons who fail to immediately obey your request. You are also authorized to utilize the 125th wagon company or any other unit of the National Guard in this evacuation and call on personnel to assist you. This is an important public health emergency and demands immediate action.

Given under my hand at Louisville this January the 29th, 1937.

State Board of Health of Kentucky,
By A. T. McCormick
State Health Commissioner[25]

The McCracken County Board of Health also added its endorsement to the order with Dr. R. E. Teague

adding the following endorsement to the state order:

> And whereas the foregoing order is mandatory and must be complied with by the McCracken County Board of Health, it is therefore directed that the order of the State Board of Health of Kentucky be enforced according to its provisions as above set forth.
>
> We recommend that the utmost courtesy and discretion be shown in the enforcement of said order and we further order that this document be read to all persons before compelling their evacuation.[26]
>
> McCracken County Board of Health
> By R. E. Teague, M. D.
> McCracken County Health Officer

With this order now in hand, local officials began to move toward compliance and started creating a plan for the coming move. Paducah's population in 1937 was estimated to be about 32,000 to 40,000 people and by late January when the order was issued to leave the flood area, it was estimated that about 8,000 people still remained inside their homes. Many of those residents who had left early and established a place for themselves and their families to stay returned to the city to help with flood efforts. Some of these people were deputized and helped out the police with patrolling against looting and to help those people still stranded to get out, check on stranded pets, or to cook food at the various shelters. Carroll Graves, Sr.,

noted in his flood diary on January 29, 1937, "Garland's birthday, he will remember it I think. They say we will have to get out of Paducah today so Major and I are going out and take a look and see. Well we are back and Major and his family are on their way to Florida now."[27]

As occurs in all disasters, some citizens take it upon themselves to help because they believe that the established governmental assistance groups are not working fast enough. While this could always be bad or good, it turned out to be a lifesaver for the city. Tom Waller and W. F. McMurry, along with Pastor Frederick H. Olert met and decided to help in any way that they could. One suggested that they contact Kentucky Senator Alben W. Barkley and see what he could do. However, since telephone and telegraph service had been out for days, they quickly dismissed that idea and left that task to the locally elected officials. They decided to go to Mayfield, Kentucky, and see what assistance they could provide. After meeting with several friends and businessmen, the trio was told that Mayfield would take as many refugees as Paducah could send and also provide some transportation assets to help in the move. Food was ordered, boats requested, and the men returned to Paducah to set up their own disaster headquarters at the Twinkling Star Club. According to the article by Edwin B. Greenwald, in the *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, "It worked much as it had downtown 18 hours earlier – boats, boots, flashlights, medicine, lumber..." in reference to the American Red Cross committee that was set up and headquartered at Sixth Street

and Broadway in Paducah. So with the evacuation order in place and two established disaster groups formed and ready to go, it was time to begin the mandatory movement of the people. The water now covered most of the east side and reached west all the way to 28th Street. A 300 foot long dock was built there to accommodate the refugees as they arrived and transferred to waiting vehicles. With the rush of people to leave, rumors began to spread that earthen dams were failing upstream and the river would reach 100 feet within the next couple of days. Also, the belief that saboteurs were now operating in the southeast United States to cause panic and defer attention from Adolf Hitler and Germany's "saber rattling" in Europe.

Many dangers were lurking when the movement of people began and boats headed west loaded with humanity and their wares. With the low temperatures ice had clogged many of the streets and the tops of abandoned vehicles could be seen along the sides of streets. The water was murky and hid potential dangers such as logs, bricks, wood, and soil that could injure would-be rescuers if they fell in. The Irvin Cobb Hotel at Sixth Street and Broadway and the Boy Scout Headquarters that now housed the Red Cross relief effort, became the center of the evacuation even though the hotel itself was surrounded by water with boats entering its lobby to load and unload items. People began streaming in by foot, boat, and anything that they could acquire that would get them out of the water. There had been several larger buildings that were set up early during the crisis to take the first refugees.

They were located at various places such as the Southern Hotel, Union Station, Lee School, First Presbyterian Church, First Methodist Church, and Whittier School. All of these places had to be emptied and the people moved up Jefferson Street or Broadway to the dry west end of the city. At the dock on 28th street, the people were then transported to Arcadia School which had been set up as the "clearing house" for refugees earlier during the flood. Over a 10 day period, more than 22,000 people would register at Arcadia School as refugees.[28] Here people would be registered for accountability, medically checked and inoculated, given hot food, clothing if needed, and a bed to sleep in. Later, as the general evacuation got underway, Arcadia served as a pipeline to the other relief stations that were set up out of town such as Mayfield ad Murray. George Rogers Clark School was cleared of refugees and then set up as an emergency hospital and aide station. Boats from the Tennessee Valley Authority and the United States Cost Guard arrived to help in retrieving the good people and the pace picked up with nearly all of the people having been evacuated by February 2nd.

With so many people leaving their homes and most everything they owned, the city was placed under "unofficial" martial law in the early days of the flood. During the last part of January 1937 more troops were added to the National Guard units and local law enforcement already in place. 159 regular army troops from Company B and Company C, 2nd U.S. Infantry under the command of Captain William H. Collette arrived from Fort Sheridan, Illinois. They

came fully equipped so as to not add to the burden already placed upon the resources being used to look after the growing number of refugees.[29] These soldiers were there to assist with the evacuation and were to remain under civilian control even though they were given civil police powers. Paducah City Manager L. V. Bean was now placed in overall charge of the flood disaster effort with Colonel C. Burnett, USA, being placed in charge of military forces and would be subordinate to Bean. At this time only about 3,000 people were still in the flooded areas and efforts were begun to locate and evacuate them. While all attention was being paid to the evacuation of the city, some very important milestones in the flood saga was reached in the seemingly never ending rise of the Ohio. On January 30, 1937, the Ohio River reached the 60 foot mark for the first time posting a level reading of 60.3 feet, but on February 2nd, as the river reached 60.8 feet in height, the weary residents and rescuers of Paducah had no way of knowing that the river had finally crested and would now begin the slow return to its banks. At this point the river was more than 7 miles wide at Paducah and approximately 27,000 of its residents had now been evacuated. As the news began to flow out of the crest, many residents could not believe it because they had been told time and again that a crest was coming, only to have the river rise to new heights. On February 3rd, the river level dropped for the first time in more than 30 days registering a flood height of 60.75 inches, a drop of a quarter inch.[30] In his article Edwin B. Greenwald wrote that "A might flood had reached its summit.

Its destruction was done. Now the gigantic task of rehabilitation awaited."[31]

The federal government, traditionally slow to react to emergencies, began working with state and local officials to help make the rehabilitation as painless for the city and returning residents as possible. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), American Red Cross, Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), Resettlement Administration (RA), and the Disaster Loan Corporation (DLC), were all either already in the disaster area or were on their way to extend what federal assistance they could to Paducah. No doubt that Kentucky Senator Alben W. Barkley had a hand in helping along the process since not only was Kentucky his home state, but Paducah was his hometown. The American Red Cross would play perhaps the most important role of getting people back on their feet and being sure that food, clothing, and shelter are available until the last need is met. They had played this role well since the early days of the flood by moving the earliest refugees to shelter. The Works Progress Administration would provide jobs for the jobless through the repair and maintenance of public facilities that had been damaged by the flood waters. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation would make loans available to businesses and individuals who had flood damaged property. Character loans would also be made to deserving individuals who had no collateral. The Home Owners Loan Corporation would help to get extensions for existing loans to people who needed

it as a result of the flood. The Resettlement Administration would be in charge of helping to assist families who might want to move out of the city and onto a farm or other property outside the city. All of these agencies would be working in the area for the next six months to a year. Over the next several years, these organizations would get new names, merge together, or go away altogether. In 1979, the Federal Emergency Management Agency would be created to wrap all of these former agencies' jobs into one federal agency to handle disasters that overwhelm state and local government resources.

With the receding water, citizens began to ask about when they might possibly return to their properties. No one was to be allowed until the water began to show real signs of dropping and then after their properties had been inspected for soundness. Some of the properties were well over 50 years old and the water more than likely had damaged some structures beyond repair and would have to be condemned. Damage to public works utilities such as Paducah Water Works, which came back online on February 26, 1937, was repaired and began to provide fresh water to the city. Eventually, telephone, electricity, and gas services all were repaired. Debris clean-up would take months as people brought to the curb their water damaged items and goods. Street drains had to be cleaned out and flushed. Sanitary sewers also had to be flushed out as well. Huge logs that had floated downstream and detoured into Paducah had to be removed from the streets. Automobiles of every

type, abandoned during the crisis, now sat ruined and had to be removed or repaired. Dead animals (with the exception of Bossie the cow) were everywhere and also had to be removed. As the water receded, some structures could not stay upright as they began to dry out and simply collapsed. Some homes and buildings broke loose from their foundations and floated away, never to be seen again.

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Notes:

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[29]"159 Regular Army Troops Reach Here", The *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, February 1, 1937, 1.
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